

Brainpower Will Yield Advantage in 'Great Power Competition,' Navy Leaders Say



Sailors aboard the amphibious assault ship USS Wasp man the rails while arriving in Subic Bay. The Navy's Education for Seapower initiative is creating a Navy Community College for enlisted personnel to acquire more technical education, including an associate degree. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Daniel Barker

TYSONS CORNER, Va. – With strategic adversaries like Russia and China catching up technologically, the United States will need to rely on “intellectual ability” to maintain a competitive military advantage, according to acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly.

The technological gap is only going to grow in the rising ‘great power competition,’ Modly told a gathering of defense industry executives here.

“You all see this because your companies are getting ripped off by the Chinese and others. They’re pulling that technology and they’re quickly putting it into systems that will compete with us,” he said.

The best way to maintain “our enduring competitive advantage in an environment like that is going to be our intellectual ability – to think, to be agile thinkers,” Modly told the audience at a National Defense Industry Association-sponsored discussion hosted by government consultants LMI.

A growing need for Sailors, Marines and civilian workers who could think strategically and adapt quickly was revealed by the Navy's Education for Seapower study, leading to the Navy decision to ramp up and prioritize education as a strategic enabler.

Joining Modly on the panel, John Kroger, the department's first chief learning officer, enumerated changes to enhance and encourage educational opportunities and more fully integrate the Navy and Marine Corps. Kroger, a Yale-educated academic and Harvard-trained lawyer who enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps at age 17, said it would be "a transformational thing for our force if we can get education right."

The first job, he said, would be creating a Naval Community College to provide technology education beyond traditional military and naval skills. Kroger said the school will be based in Quantico, Virginia, close to the Marine Corps base housing the Marine Corps University, Marine Corps War College and numerous schools, including Command and Staff, Officer Candidate and Basic schools.

Interviews to select the new school's president and provost are underway, Kroger said, adding that he hoped to have the first students enrolled by June 2021. The curriculum would include both residential and online classes. Kroger said he and his staff consulted with the U.S. Army and Air Force, which have outpaced the Navy in developing new education programs.

Currently, the Community College of the Air Force is the only degree-granting institution of higher learning in the world dedicated exclusively to enlisted personnel. It offers enlisted airmen the opportunity to earn a two-year associate in applied science degree.

Kroger said it would be prohibitively expensive to educate 40,000 to 50,000 students a year at a brick-and-mortar school. But the revolution in education – that includes distance learning and minimal in-person residency like executive education programs conducted at many university business schools – makes such a sweeping goal possible.

The Navy Department announced plans in December 2019 to add more than \$300 million to its spending on education over the next five years, starting with \$109 million shifted to learning initiatives in fiscal year 2020. The Education for Seapower initiative also calls for creating a new unifying Naval University System to strengthen existing Navy and Marine Corps educational institutions and align strategic needs and increase agility.